

Heather Horton 2 – Toast

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

"Toast of the town." That would be quite a title. Today we'll learn about a culinary entrepreneur who is helping her town in the food business. She operates a cake decorating enterprise and, soon, will open a new restaurant with the name of Toast. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we met Heather Horton and learned about her involvement in the revitalization of the historic downtown in Pittsburg, Kansas. She is also the owner of these growing small businesses.

In 2017, USDA Rural Development awarded a grant to help build markets for local foods in southeast Kansas. That project was led by Heather Morgan, director of engagement and community development for K-State's Technology Development Institute. She identified Heather Horton as an example of excellence in local foods entrepreneurship.

As a child, Heather had helped her parents in their family restaurant. In later years, her mother started making wedding cakes and Heather helped her decorate them.

After Heather graduated from Pittsburg State in commercial art, she decided to offer the wedding cakes as a business. In 2007, she and her husband Roger bought a building in downtown Pittsburg, renovated it, and opened for business in 2009.

The business is known as Sweet Designs Cakery. It was more than a bakery, it was a cakery. Heather specializes in designing and producing beautiful cakes for all occasions. Based on the photos on her website, these cakes can only be described as works of art. Roger joined the business in 2010. In recent years, Heather also taught culinary arts at Pittsburg High School through Fort Scott Community College.

Heather and Roger had the idea for another enterprise: A restaurant that could utilize locally-grown foods. They located a site for it in downtown Pittsburg, just a half-block from Sweet Designs Cakery. Then they needed to find a name for this new restaurant. Heather found inspiration in her childhood memories of eating toasted bread.

"I've loved toast since childhood," Heather said, and they chose Toast as the name of the new restaurant. Her trial runs include open-faced sandwiches and other items. Roger is test-baking artisan bread which will be offered at the new restaurant, but the menu is even more than that. "It will be a fast casual restaurant with a full range of artistically crafted foods with a healthy twist," Heather said. "We can offer a limitless combination of deliciousness. We'll have beverages too, and toast has multiple meanings," she said.

"We're going to try to use locally-grown food as much as possible, which means sourcing from multiple farmers," Heather said. She has been working hard at identifying suppliers and doing some test cooking. "I'll mostly be trying to buy up any excess produce that isn't sold at farmers markets," Heather said. "That's a win-win for us all and cuts back on waste."

Through the USDA Rural Development grant, Heather Morgan put out a call for local growers to connect with the new restaurant. Heather Horton now has an extensive list of growers for a large variety of different products.

"For example, I have an egg lady, and I have one grower specifically for garlic," Heather said. That seems like a pretty specific niche, but that's the product on which that grower wants to concentrate. The restaurant will utilize fruits and vegetables from a variety of sources, including Heather's mother.

"She's always supportive and loves to garden," Heather said about her mom. "She'll supply me with fresh herbs and produce."

Heather's suppliers come from Pittsburg and around the region, including nearby rural communities such as Erie, population 1150; Weir, population 686; and Mulberry, population 520 people. Now, that's rural.

The new restaurant is expected to open in late summer of 2019. "I'm excited about the possibilities," Heather said.

Toast of the town. That would be a wonderful title. In the case of this young entrepreneur, Toast will be her town's newest restaurant. We commend Heather and Roger Horton for making a difference by promoting local foods. To them, I think we should raise a toast.

And there's more. Southeast Kansas also is a source of tree nuts. We'll learn about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.